

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Death by Suburb

How to Keep the Suburbs from Killing Your Soul

by

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This reader's guide is primarily for book clubs or reading groups. If you prefer a small group study, visit www.deathbysuburb.net and click on "small group resources," where you'll find a free 8-week study guide on the eight suburban toxins and corresponding spiritual practices identified in the book.

For more resources, including a blog on spirituality, visit www.deathbysuburb.net.

CHAPTER 1: THE THICKER LIFE

KEY QUOTE: For centuries, the classic spiritual disciplines or practices have enlarged the capacity of ordinary people to engage the Sacred in the ordinary. Spiritual practices are not really a direct route to an awakened God-consciousness. Some days, they seem stupid, quite worthless, just one of the many activities that keep me from God, even. Yet over time, they awaken us to a brave new world that is, ultimately, more satisfying and true to who we are than what we encounter without them.

Discussion Questions

1. What's the most maddening part of living in the suburbs?
2. Think about living the perfect life. What are you doing? What do you have? How does it all end?
3. Do you believe that it's possible to live in suburbia and not capitulate to its values? What would that look like for you?
4. Who are some people you think are living the thicker, deeper life?

CHAPTER 2: INSIDE SPACE

THE TOXIN: “I am in control of my life.”

THE PRACTICE: The prayer of silence.

KEY QUOTE: Making time or space for God is the most basic element of spirituality. You can’t stop your busyness, really. You begin to open your life to God in small amounts.

Discussion Questions

1. How do you try to control your life? Or, if that is too personal, how do you see others trying to control their lives?
2. Why are solitude and silence so difficult to implement in your life?
3. Do you have friends or acquaintances who model the discipline of solitude amid a busy suburban life? How would you describe them?
4. What are some of life’s deeper questions that may surface during times of silence?

CHAPTER 3: SCUFFLE WITH THE SELF

THE TOXIN: “I am what I do and what I own.”

THE PRACTICE: The journey through the self.

KEY QUOTE: The war within—the battle with the self—is really prayer itself. It’s the long struggle to see Goodness and Beauty in a bogus world.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the key immortality symbols in your suburb?
2. How does the ugliness of the self surface in the suburbs? One example, of course, is the hyper-competition among parents regarding their brilliant students. It's not really about the students, it's about the parents. What are some other faces of the self in 'burbia?
3. The most basic element of Christian spirituality is that, because of faith, God is within you, and thus the pursuit of God is an interior journey. How does that strike you? How does that compare with your understanding of the Christian faith?

CHAPTER 4: ABOUT-FACE

THE TOXIN: "I want my neighbor's life."

THE PRACTICE: Friendship with those who have no immortality symbols.

KEY QUOTE: The suburbs seem to promote a kind of vigilance on the possessions of others. It includes both a hyperconsciousness of self and a hypervigilance on the possessions of others. It's ubiquitous, heightened vigilance. I'm eternally on point to compare myself to those I perceive have more than I. I'm always weighing my immortality symbols against others'.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some practices that you've found helpful in countering the invisible pressure to possess that which you don't yet have?
2. Do you have any friendships with people who would be considered poor or disabled? What have you learned from them?
3. The meaning behind the word *repentance* is to take a spiritual U-turn. You turn and face the opposite direction. What makes turning our attention from those who have more than we do to those with less (money, power, and privilege) so excruciatingly difficult?

CHAPTER 5: REMEMBERING LAUGHTER

THE TOXIN: "My life should be easier than it is."

THE PRACTICE: Accepting my cross with grace and patience.

KEY QUOTE: I want the thicker life in Christ, but I don't want to address the hard reality of my life. Even in suburbia, life is hard.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you agree with the assumption that "life is hard"? Why?
2. Do you agree with the point that to fully enjoy life you must fully embrace and come to terms with the suffering

that has come into your life? What might that actually look like?

3. What kinds of suffering have you experienced? What have you learned about yourself? About God?

CHAPTER 6: SHIRKER SERVICE

THE TOXIN: “I need to make a difference with my life.”

THE PRACTICE: Pursuing action, not results.

KEY QUOTE: I confess that I am a Shirker. I want results when I serve the poor, the imprisoned, the destitute. I want results because I want to make a difference with my life. What good is serving the poor if they don't help themselves and turn their lives around?

Discussion Questions

1. What is often behind the drive to make a difference in this life? What's so bad about wanting to make a difference with your life?
2. As you evaluate your service in church or in the community, how are you developing relationships with the poor? What have they taught you about God?
3. What one activity or act of service could help you begin a relationship with someone who is bereft of any immortality symbols and who needs, mostly, your prayers?

CHAPTER 7: LASHED DOWN

THE TOXIN: “My church is the problem.”

THE PRACTICE: Staying put in your church.

KEY QUOTE: Without a long-term attachment to a local church, there is little spiritual deepening. The maddening frustration that prompts someone to leave one church for another may be precisely the experience that triggers spiritual progress, if one stays.

Discussion Questions

1. What role does church play in your life?
2. Have you found the church to be a source of deep relationships? Or place of hurt? Why?
3. Think about the different churches you have attended through the years. Is your relationship with God that much closer as a result of attending one of them? How do you measure that?

CHAPTER 8: SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP

THE TOXIN: “What will this relationship do for me?”

THE PRACTICE: Building deep and meaningful friendships.

KEY QUOTE: Friendship subverts the system of power, how things get done in the 'burbs and the class system organized around symbols of immortality.

Discussion Questions

1. How do you see the transactional nature of relationships at work in your suburb?
2. How many people would you describe as a Friend, based on this chapter?
3. How have you seen God at work in your Friendships?

CHAPTER 9: IN LOVE WITH TIME

THE TOXIN: “I need to get more done in less time.”

THE PRACTICE: Falling in love with a day.

KEY QUOTE: The suburbs are all about saying yes to opportunity and the immortality symbols it promises. Its deep current pulls under your good intentions. We must learn to pursue an affair with time itself, to fall in love with a day.

Discussion Questions

1. Was there a time in your life where you felt the pace of life was just right? Describe the time.
2. What is behind the feeling of being trapped: “I can’t cut anything without hurting one of the kids”?
3. What would you have to do to create a real Sabbath in your life?

CHAPTER 10: STAYING AWAKE

KEY QUOTE: The suburbs require a kind of fierceness to stay fully awake to God and to the work of God in the world. . . . To your final breath, you carry out the spiritual practices of the faith and hand out cups of cold water in Jesus's name. And then you let God sort it all out.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the reoccurring, overarching themes in *Death by Suburb*?
2. How might your life be different if you implemented some of the practices, such as finding time for silence or creating a Sabbath in your life?
3. What is the one practice that you feel most hopeful about implementing in your life?